

## Many families don't know if loved one wanted to donate

By Jaclyn O'Malley ■ [jomalley@rgj.com](mailto:jomalley@rgj.com)

Most people don't like to talk about death.

That's why organ donation advocates say relatives of brain-dead patients may not be aware their loved ones wanted to donate their organs.

Phyllis Weber, CEO OF California Transplant Donor Network, explained the process of organ donation. The California network is a federally designated organ-procurement agency that coordinates organ donations in Northern Nevada and Northern California.

Hospitals are obligated under federal law to inform organ-procurement agencies of a patient's death, or imminent death, she said. When a death occurs, a network representative meets with medical officials to plan how to proceed with the possible donor.

"Is it time to approach the family?" she asked. "Has the family brought up donation?"

If the patient is a registered organ donor – in Nevada, binding legal consent is given through a designation on a person's driver's license – the donor representative explains to the family the donation process, Weber said.

If the patient is not an organ donor, the family is asked if the patient ever discussed it. They are asked for consent to donate. Most of the organs recovered in Nevada are sent to out-of-state transplant centers, mostly in California.

"We know families at a time like this do find solace in helping someone else," Weber said. "And others had already made the decision they did not wish to donate, and that's hard to turn around."

Weber said some families have misconceptions that if their loved one is an organ donor that doctors won't do everything possible to save them.

"They are not rational fears," she said. "That's why they are difficult to counteract."

Once consent is gained, Weber said the family is then asked to provide a medical history. Her staff will enter information about the donor into the national waiting list of patients, maintained by the United Network Organ Sharing. The hope is that organs will be matched to a patient.

While specific criteria differ for various organs, matching criteria generally include: blood type and size of the organs, time spent awaiting a transplant, the distance between donor and recipient, the medical urgency of the recipient, the degree of immune-system match between donor and recipient or whether the recipient is a child or an adult, according to UNOS.

Doctors from the transplant center harvest the organs from the donor, place them in coolers and take them to the patient. Generally, transportation is by medical helicopter or private jet aircraft.

Weber said transplants occur within 48 hours from the time her agency is notified about the potential donor.

Organs are only viable within the first several hours of harvesting.

"Most people think donating is the right thing to do," she said. "I think eventually all of us will know someone who has known someone who had a transplant and lived a wonderful life. Then, the whole attitude about it changes."